Animal stories and oral history:

witnessing and mourning across the species divide

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A significant feature of oral history over the past few decades has been an interest in memory, witnessing, and mourning. Most research in this area has understandably focused on memories of violence and loss suffered by human beings in war, genocide, and other major catastrophes.[1] Recent research in animal history and animal studies, however, argues that human beings can and should also bear witness to the violence committed against other-than-human animals, and that mourning is not an experience unique to people or to human-human relations. This article brings these two fields of study - oral history and animal studies - into conversation through an exploration of the themes of witnessing and mourning in a life story interview with an animal rights activist. It aims both to encourage oral historians to be more attentive to other-than-human animals in their research, and to demonstrate that oral history can contribute valuable evidence about animal lives and human-animal relations to the emerging field of animal history.

By way of setting the scene, the paper opens with some examples of published oral histories featuring people's memories of animals. The remainder concentrates on an interview with animal rights activist Dolors Benet (born in Barcelona in 1937),[2] bringing in some comparative examples of interviews with other activists from Spain and Britain. I chose to focus on the interview with Benet because it offers a lens on the diversity of human-animal relations in one life story and because it revolves largely around the interrelated processes of witnessing and mourning animal and human

lives. Dolors talks at length about two very different kinds of animals and human-animal relations: her encounters with the feral pigeons of Barcelona and her memories of her pet dogs. Drawing on historical research on animal agency, I consider what Dolors' testimony about pigeon activity might tell us about these animals as historical actors. Referencing the influential work of feminist philosopher of science Donna Haraway, I argue that Dolors' relationship with pigeons can be understand as a meeting across species in the "contact zone".

Following the discussion of human testimony to animal agency and interspecies relations in the recent past, I focus specifically on witnessing in relation to loss and violence. Here I reference recent research in philosophy, literature, and psychoanalysis concerned with animals and mourning and with human beings' ethical responsibilities towards other animals. Dolors' reflections upon the family's pet dogs, and her sadness at her husbands' illness and the couples' old age, demonstrate how the process of mourning can work across species and how this process may help to generate a wider ethics of non-violence towards all animals. Finally, I argue that interviews with activists about their everyday lives with animals contribute to the history of the animal rights movement by adding real-life nuance and complexity to the accounts available in animal rights philosophy.

Animals and oral history

Other-than-human creatures are not entirely absent from oral history. They are there in audiotapes, interview transcripts, and published research. Yet animals are rarely the focus of oral historians' analysis. Indeed, most of us are trained first and foremost to listen to stories by, and about, human beings and their relationships to other people. This is reflected not only in our writing but also in the kinds of questions we ask and the way we conduct our interviews. Students of the practice are rarely directed to enquire about pets, farm animals, or wildlife the way we are about human kin or communities.[3] And when animals sneak into the interview scene they are typically treated as a

nuisance - interruptions or background noise to be minimised or edited out so as not to interfere with the clarity of the interviewee's narrative.[4]

Yet when animals are allowed in the results can be illuminating, reminding us of the prominent place of animals as actors and symbols in storytelling and oral traditions across different cultures.[5] Take this opening childhood memory from the chapter "The Bear and the Sycamore Tree" in Alessandro Portelli's study of Harlan County, Kentucky:

> Well, back then we didn't have no TV, or no radio or anything and at nighttime when it got dark you had to go in on account of snakes. We got rattlesnake and copperheads around here, but at nighttime we'd go in and build a fire in the fireplace and Mommy and my daddy would sit around and tell us stories about when they were growing up. And stories their parents had told *them* about growing up. That's where the storytelling started from.[6]

It is no coincidence that this story appears in a book that focuses on working-class rural and small-town people. To the extent that animals have a history in oral history, it is largely in relation to the countryside. Let's recall that many early oral historians wrote about rural communities; in the life stories of hunters, farmers and other country dwellers domestic and wild animals alike are regular features of the day-to-day landscape. The pages of Raphael Samuel's study of Headington Quarry in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for instance, are filled with descriptions of poachers' dogs, rabbits, horses, pigs, and chickens.[7] Though focussed on human life and labour, Samuel's study is revealing as well about the role of animals in the local economy and relevant to the history of animals as workers.[8] Oral history can also tell us how people *felt* about the animals they worked with. Ronald Blythe's *Akenfield*, which has been cited as a landmark oral history study of the English countryside,[9] provides significant evidence that animals were of more than financial value to rural communities. Farmers recall that horses were sometimes treated as "friends and loved like

men";[10] for others, pigs were "individuals" with human-like characters for whom farmers had a fondness.[11] *Akenfield* also provides valuable evidence of the dramatic changes in human-animal relations in the English countryside in the post-war period, which witnessed the rapid expansion of industrial agriculture. The treatment of animals in this new environment evoked conflicting emotions among the rural people documented in Blythe's study.[12] A young man working on a new factory farm with pigs and chickens tells Blythe about the moral dilemmas he experiences at work:

> I feel that the kind of farming I do now isn't quite "right". Certainly it isn't satisfying. I long to do arable; I still dream of it. But where would I get the kind of money for even the smallest possible arable farm? (…) Pigs have strong personalities and it is easy to get fond of them. I am always getting fond of pigs and I feel a bit conscious-stricken that one day I just put them inside for their whole lives.[13]

The village vet interviewed by Blythe reflects on the dilemma he faces when a farmer tries to justify the tail docking of sheep: "He might even have cheek enough to remind me that I hunt! (…) A horse is pleasant to treat. I am making distinctions between animals, you see. It is wrong - unjust - but I am making them. I am caught up in this new confusion."[14] Although Blythe does not explore this "new confusion" among his interviewees in detail, the examples he cites highlight some of the themes I explore below: what human testimony can tell us about changes in human-animal relations and animal behaviour across time and how these changes affected people as well as animals; people's sometimes complex and contradictory attitudes towards animals; the affective bonds that sometimes form between across species in different times and places, even those in which people have obvious power of life and death over other animals; and the ethical issues thrown up by these power relations, in particular by the violence committed by people against animals and how human beings come to terms with these dilemmas in their day-to-day lives.

Human testimony and animal agency

Dolors Benet was an early member of Spain's first non-governmental animal rights organization, the Association for the Defense of the Rights of Animals (Asociación para la Defensa de los Derechos del Animal, ADDA)[15] founded in 1976, some months after the death of Francisco Franco. Four decades later, by now one of dozens of Spanish groups dedicated to animal advocacy, ADDA is run by a handful of volunteers and paid staff from a small office in Barcelona. It was in that building's basement, on a muggy July day in 2015, that I interviewed seventy-eight-year-old Dolors. She spoke at length about her activities in ADDA and also about her closest relationships with people and animals, especially dogs and pigeons. This combination provides an interesting opportunity to explore very different kinds of cross-species relations. In this section I interpret Dolors' accounts of pigeons as a testimony to the agency exercised by those animals in their interactions with people as well as evidence of the possibility of cross-species encounters in situations of unequal power relations.

Dogs and pigeons occupy radically different places in contemporary Western societies and, indeed, in contemporary animal studies. Whereas dogs and other companion animals figure prominently in this growing field, Colin Jerolmack notes that there is less attention to those animals constructed as "problems", especially species of urban wildlife defined as "pests".[16] In his historical study of changing attitudes towards pigeons in modern New York City, Jerolmack demonstrates that a bird once regarded as gentle and valued for its sociability with humans gradually came to be seen as a public nuisance and threat to human health (a status summed up in the term "rats with wings").[17] By the second half of the twentieth century, in the wake of increasing urbanization, pigeons' low status was such that they had become valid objects of human ridicule, revulsion, and abuse.[18] Examples from Catalan media indicate a similar development, albeit somewhat later. In the early

twentieth-first century, Barcelona press sources referred to pigeons as a "plague" and "rats with wings",[19] labelling plans to reduce the pigeon population a "battle" and even, in terms evocative of Spain's imperial past, a "crusade".[20]

Dolors' interview bears witness to the maltreatment of pigeons by humans in the modern city. She expresses anger at parents who don't interfere when their children bother the birds, declaring forcefully:

> You aren't superior. You're the same, or less. They are as they are. For example, pigeons, the poor things, breed all year. Nature played a dirty trick on them. Birds breed in the spring, and that's it. But pigeons breed *all* year. They have to struggle all their lives to feed their children. For example, I, on the balcony, I have a bird feeder. I put out food for the birds all year. (…) There used to be pigeon lofts on the roofs, for them to breed. Now they have no place to go. What right do they have?[21]

Dolors' description of her relationship with pigeons echoes an excerpt from an interview I conducted with another member of ADDA. When I asked Carla about her day-to-day relationships with animals she replied that after years of defending animal welfare, she had concluded that the best approach is one of minimum intervention. She opens the patio doors of her house to allow pigeons to feed:

> For me pigeons are perfect, because I don't, I don't intervene. They come because they want to. There they are. Sometimes they stay for a while, keeping me company. And they jump up on the table. But then they go.[22]

In some ways Dolors' and Carla's accounts of their interactions with pigeons are familiar ones for oral history, which often presents the memories of "ordinary people" as counter-narratives to official histories or hegemonic versions of the recent past — in this case constructions of urban feral pigeons as "rat with wings". We can also understand their narratives as a form of testimony: Dolors and Carla bear witness to the violence sometimes suffered by other-than-human animals at

the hands of human beings (I will have more to say about oral history narrators as witnesses to violence against animals below). Finally, like oral history studies that make creative use of what John Howard calls "twice-told stories" or "hearsay evidence" to write about the relationships of people who did not leave written records,[23] these narrators offer valuable accounts of the different kinds of connections that can form across species, even in hostile environments and even though the animals in those relationships do not leave evidence of their experiences of those relationships.

But I would like to go further. When read alongside other kinds of evidence these eye-witness accounts can also tell us something about the changing activities of the pigeons themselves. In 2002 a leading figure in animal history, Erica Fudge, claimed that although this new area of study had yielded "much absolutely fascinating and rewarding work", it should not strictly speaking be called "the history of animals". According to Fudge, a history of animals was technically impossible because historians writing about other creatures in the past faced two insurmountable barriers: periodization and sources, both of them central to the discipline of history. Because animals do not share with people a sense of temporality and do not leave written documents of their lives, they cannot, strictly speaking, have a history. Fudge proposed instead the label "the history of human attitudes towards animals".[24]

At stake in this claim that the history of animals can only ever be a history of human attitudes towards them and not a history of the experiences of the animals themselves are both conceptual and methodological issues: what we understand by the history of animals, on one hand, and how to identify and interpret evidence in order to write it, on the other. In recent years some historians have challenged the assumption that we can only write about animals as human representations, arguing that it is desirable and possible to understand animals as historical agents, "as active beings rather than as static objects".[25] Fudge herself has revised her earlier claim about the impossibility of a history of animals. In a 2013 article she revisited the question of historiography, this time asking how

historians might write about animals as actors.[26] Beginning with a seventeenth-century written account of a specific human-animal encounter — a woman milking cows — Fudge turns to animal science and sensory studies to help her interpret both sides of this meeting across species. In doing so she addresses her earlier concerns about sources and periodisation. Scientific studies, concludes Fudge, can help historians both to imagine what it was "like like to be a cow"[27] in early modern England, and to historicize that experience by understanding how it differed from those of dairy cows in other historical periods.

Following the lead of Fudge and others[28] I propose that Dolors' and Carla's accounts of pigeon-human relations can be historically contextualised with reference to recent research in pigeon ecology. One study conducted in the early twentieth-first century, for example, concludes that feral pigeons living in large European cities have learned to identify friendly human feeders, and to gravitate towards them and away from more hostile people.[29] In other words, pigeons do not act only out of instinct (often understood as a timeless, fixed form of behaviour, in contrast to the rational historically contingent decision-making unique to humans), but make choices in their quest for food and resting places. These choices are made with an awareness of differing kinds of human behavior. Against this background we can understand the pigeons who visit Dolors and Carla as historical actors seeking out safe settings to gather and feed in a contemporary city populated by potentially dangerous humans, choosing which people to form relationships with in a specific time and place.

Although the pigeons on Dolors' balcony and Carla's patio did not leave traditional historical records,[30] the human testimony in these interviews provides evidence of their agency. Attributing agency in the past to animals and other nonhuman entities[31] involves a reconceptualization of agency as something not unique to human beings, nor necessarily dependent on human qualities such as consciousness, will, and intentionality.[32] It also requires an expansive definition of intelligence as an ability manifested in different ways in different species. Pigeons, for example, display intelligence in

their use of memory and categorization skills when foraging for food.[33] As Fudge has argued, the intelligence of pigeons and many other animals is underestimated or even denied by people who define intelligence in terms of the human capacity for language.[34] But if we understand animal intelligence to be based on different criteria the relationship between intelligence and human language seems more fragile. Dolors repeatedly states in her interview that animal difference does not equate with animal inferiority and her care of pigeons is a manifestation of that principle. Her understanding of and being in the world has been shaped by this particular cross-species encounter.

Following the work of Donna Haraway, we might further understand Dolors' balcony and the entrance to Carla's house as "contact zones" for the meeting of different species.[35] Haraway adopts and adapts the term contact zone from postcolonial theorist Mary Louise Pratt, who uses it to foreground "the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters so easily ignored or suppressed by diffusionist accounts of conquest and domination". For Pratt, the notion of contact highlights the fact that subjectivity is constituted through interrlationality. Contact zones recognize the agency of all subjects who interrelate within them even though such zones are typically characterized by "radically asymmetrical relations of power".[36] By theorizing human-animal relations as a coming together in the contact zone, Haraway rejects anthropocentric assumptions of human superiority as well as those animal rights philosophies that emphasize human control over other creatures at the expense of interrelatedness and mutually constituted subjectivity.[37] Central to Haraway's reconceptualization of the contact zone, therefore, is the shared agency of humans and animals including in situations where different species exercise different degrees of power. If animals are actors in the contact zone, shaping and sharing history alongside humans, their actions shape the historical subjectivity of those humans as well. People and animals alike are made and unmade when species meet inside the contact zone.

Bearing witness to violence against animals

By talking about the pigeons she observes in public squares and on her balcony, Dolors is not only providing evidence of a particular cross-species relationship and of animal agency; she is also bearing witness to the violence sometimes suffered by those creatures in contemporary Barcelona. Witnessing in oral history is often focussed on atrocities committed against human beings by other humans. In situations of genocide or other forms of mass violence the testimonies of survivors and outsiders provide invaluable historical evidence of lives lived and destroyed and of people's resistance to violence and oppression. Crucially, such eye-witness accounts also challenge oppressors' attempts to control the historical record through censorship, obliteration of individual and collective memory, and destruction of written documents and material culture. Witnessing in such contexts is therefore an explicitly political act; it recognizes hierarchies (most notably of race, religion, gender, class) and opposes them through empathy with the victims and survivors of violence along with a commitment to relay and publicize their stories.[38] In cases where the observer is an outsider witnessing amounts to translating into spoken language the experiences of those who have been silenced by violence, whether through death or trauma.

In a recent article detailing her ethnographic research with dairy cows Kathryn Gillespie argues that witnessing can and should also work to contest hierarchies and power relations among different species.[39] Human witnessing across species boundaries is particularly important, she argues, when animals are treated as objects for human use and abuse, most notable in the case of farm animals destined for human consumption as food and other products. Although less extreme we can also consider the example, recounted by Dolors, of people taunting and mistreating the pigeons of Barcelona. When there are substantial power imbalances between human beings and animals, bearing witness can be, in the words of Gillespie, "a subversive political act of acknowledging an animal's subjectivity and her embodied experience".[40] Witnessing can help to ensure that physical

destruction does not eliminate all traces of a lived existence; but it can also take a physical and emotional toll on the witness. People who witness violence, including violent forms of killing, against other humans and other-than-human animals may themselves experience grief.[41] Although grief is often considered to be a private affair it can be made public and politicized through the acts of speaking or writing, that is, through the creation of a record and through a commitment to defending the victims of violence and challenging the violence itself. In the case of Dolors, the decision to defend animals against violence led to a lifetime commitment to animal rights, one that formed a bridge between her private life and public activism. The following section looks in more detail at how the processes of grief, mourning, and politics come together in her interview.

Mourning in the contact zone

When I met Dolors she was living with her ailing husband, rarely leaving his side, except to do the daily shopping. Her meeting with me was a break in her usual routine, a rare chance to talk at length to someone other than her husband. And talk she did. In her own words: "When I get to talking, love, I don't stop!"[42] Dolors' speech was animated and punctured with laughter but she also touched on the heavier side of life. Following some discussion of her activist years at the outset of the interview, she paused to reflect:

> This is another moment of my life. The saddest part. Because we can expect little in the way of good now. Very little. That's how life is. My husband is 86. That's his age. I'm 78. So, now comes the descent. We can't fool ourselves. That's the way it is.[43]

Her husband's illness brought with it another loss: because of his frailty and the couple's limited mobility they could no longer share their lives with dogs. Throughout the interview Dolors' account of her family life moves back and forth between happy memories of close human and canine

companionship and painful reflections on their endings. Indeed, the processes of mourning human and animal lives are not easy to disentangle.

Dolors introduces us to the dogs in her life early on, recalling the strays who roamed her family's popular Barcelona neighborhood in the harsh years following the Spanish civil war. After they married Dolors and her husband struggled to find an apartment to share with their pets:

> Sometimes they don't want them. So I had to get rid of them. Well. My two little dogs, a female and a male. And that's how it was, until that day, I was going to do the shopping, I was in the street. I don't know how they let him go. An adorable little dog. Really lovely. [Sigh] And ever since then, after one, we've always had two. Always abandoned ones. Until this last one, who died just now, in January. But because of my husband's illness - he's old too. He's not stable. So we can't have anymore. That's our real sorrow. Because we would have more. But now it just can't be.[44]

The themes of loss, illness, and ageing merge here with a palpable sense of grief. But this passage also rings with the joyful memory — marked by a strong sigh — of the family's first rescue dog. The affection Dolors and her husband share for the dogs in their lives emerges again later in the interview:

> Dogs love you so much. No matter how much I love them I'll *never* love them as much as they love us. It's something… Every time I see a dog, wow. Ah! We lose sight. They give us so much happiness, so much - Now we're alone. Imagine. We have the same, but we're missing him. And even more because we can't have any more. I'd have another one. He died in January. But I'd love to have another one. But it can't be. And the emptiness that it's left - it's something nothing can fill.[45]

Dolors' lament for her recently deceased dog and her pain at the absence of canine companionship are intimately tied to her grief at the fading of human life — the deterioration of her husband's health and the end of her own and his youth. The repeated association between human and animal mortality in this interview resonates with recent research in animal studies that theorizes grief and mourning across species. The philosopher Chloë Taylor, for example, has argued that Judith Butler's influential writing on corporeal vulnerability is relevant to relationships between people and animals as well as those among human beings. In "Violence, Mourning, Politics" Butler argues that the recognition of a common bodily vulnerability among people can provide the basis for a collective response to military violence and for a new kind of ethics in the face of atrocities committed against different human communities.[46] Written in the period following the attacks of September 2001, Butler's piece proposes that the suffering and grief caused by the attacks need not have led inevitably to retributive violence but could have resulted instead in recognition of the suffering and grief of others. An acknowledgment of vulnerability based on common human mortality could in turn engender a sense of responsibility towards those vulnerable to different kinds of violence, including the military force exercised in the name of protecting "us". Butler is very careful to stress that this "us" or "we" is difficult to define and that the recognition that all people share a bodily vulnerability does not mean that all people are equally vulnerable to violence. Indeed, an ethical encounter depends upon an awareness of the different degrees of human vulnerability.[47] Yet within these differences Butler proposes that grief itself may provide the basis for a recognition of our ethical responsibility towards others and indeed the basis for political community.[48] Taylor takes Butler to task for focusing too narrowly on the human and "exclud(ing) animals from the sphere of ethical consideration". Nevertheless, Taylor is inspired by Butler's writing to consider the ways in which violence, mourning and ethics can extend across species.[49] What she identifies as missing in Butler's work Taylor finds in literary texts, specifically J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. According to Taylor, as the

novel's main character David comes to recognize his own psychical and emotional frailty he begins to empathize more fully with other animals, especially abandoned dogs, and to acknowledge his responsibility towards them.[50] Thus the novel provides an example of "an extended Butlerian ethics, one that considers the corporeal vulnerability of both human and non-human animals".[51]

In her book *Melancholia's Dog*, the literary critic Alice A. Kuzniar likewise looks to literature and philosophy, as well as psychoanalysis, to explore the complex emotional ties between people and dogs. Influenced in part by Sigmund Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia", Kuzniar argues that in contemporary Western culture human-canine relations are often melancholic because of the popular disavowal of the affective dimension of the relationship. Although dogs are probably the closest of all animals to human beings this disavowal means that people's feelings for their canine companions are conditioned by shame.[52] Thus when a beloved pet dog dies the feelings of loss cannot be fully expressed; mourning is not allowed and melancholia ensues. In her reading of a number of modern and contemporary cultural texts — novels, artwork, and films — Kuzniar finds many examples of such melancholic human-canine relations but identifies as well alternative models that provide a form of redemption. Like Taylor, she cites *Disgrace* as a literary representation of human-canine relations characterized not by melancholia but by mourning. In Coetzee's novel a transformation in the human protagonist is occasioned by a willingness to confront the reality of dog death not with indifference or disavowal but with grief and ritual. A similar turning point occurs, according to Kuzniar, in Alejandro González Iñarritu's *Amores Perros* (*Love's a Bitch* [2000]). A film that brings together three very different tales of human-canine relations in a single catastrophic moment, *Amores Perros* also links fratricidal conflict and murder with violence against dogs. The third story of the triptych revolves around a middle-aged former revolutionary-turned-occasional-hitman, El Chivo, who, having abandoned his human family years ago, now lives an itinerant life surrounded by canine kin. The moment of transformation in El Chivo's life comes when a Rottweiler he has rescued and

nursed back to health kills the rest of his dog family. Beside himself with grief, El Chivo holds back from killing the Rottweiler in revenge. Like David in *Disgrace*, he honors the lives and deaths of the dogs by giving them a ritual farewell. It is at this stage too that El Chivo begins to mourn his human family. As Kuzniar writes, "(…) only by first admitting to himself the devastation of the loss of canine life is El Chivo able to realize what he has been repressing all his life — the repercussions of the loss of human life".[53]

Dolors' interview is not as dramatic as either *Disgrace* or *Love's a Bitch*, nor are her memories of human and canine life conditioned by the same degree of violence. What connects her interview to these cultural representations of human-canine life and death, as well as to the theorizations of mourning and melancholia cited above, is the repeated association of people's and dogs' vulnerability and the interrelated processes of mourning human and canine life. In Dolors' story, as in the work of Taylor and Kuzniar, the point is not that there is a straightforward comparison between the experiences of people and dogs but rather that the narrator's reflection on human frailty evokes memories of animal mortality, and vice versa.

But there is something more going on in Dolors' story. What draws my attention in this interview is the close connection between memories of lost canine companionship, the reckoning with her own and her husband's mortality, and Dolors' wider political commitment to animal life and welfare. Her mourning, I suggest, extends beyond the grief she expresses for the dogs and humans in her immediate family circle to a mourning for the violence committed by human beings against animals generally. Early in the interview, after summing up her early days in ADDA in the 1970s, Dolors returns to the present moment:

> Now I've retired, because my husband is sick. But it's always seemed to me something - the most beautiful struggle, but at the same time the saddest. When you realize the problem, you can't avoid it. It pops into your mind. Maybe you're laughing and suddenly

> you think of something you've heard about, and it's there, you know? Because I think it's an injustice, the greatest there can be. Because you might hurt a child, but later he's able to defend himself. He can't talk, but no animal can. And we abuse that. So it seems to me that we're just one more form of life. We're not more or less. Just another form of life. We do the same as the others, and the others the same as us. And that's how it started. I made myself available, and up to now.[54]

Dolors' remark that "(h)e can't talk, but no animal can," recalls the discussion above about witnessing in the context of beings unable to speak for themselves. Because animals cannot "talk back" to their human abusers, they need other human beings to bear witness to the abuse they suffer, human beings who will defend them. Making herself available to the animal rights movement has meant a lifetime of witnessing the violence done to different animals.

In thinking through the interrelated processes of mourning human and animal life, Taylor and Kuzniar are concerned not just with death but with violent death, in particular that of animals. Both scholars suggest that an avowal of the value of individual animals, and of human responsibility towards them, can provide the basis for a new kind of ethical relationship towards other-than-human animals. Kuzniar expresses this view most clearly when she criticizes those animal rights activists in the United Kingdom, Germany, and the United States who called for the censorship of *Love's a Bitch* because the film may have involved cruelty to dogs on set (despite the filmmakers' assurances to the contrary).[55] Such reactions, Kuzniar claims, demonstrate a limited understanding of the relationship between artistic representation and human responsibility towards animals. Since the film portrays violence against dogs as inhumane it could have been embraced as an important representation of an ethics of nonviolent human-animal relations.[56] Such an attitude would have focused not just on what happened to the animals involved in the filming but could also have precipitated "meaningful ethical debate on the magnitude and profound implications of animal loss".[57]

The wider issue Kuzniar is raising here, and the wider ethics with which her book is concerned, is whether people's empathy towards individual animals — in this case dogs — can form the basis for a more general challenge to the different forms of inequality and cruelty that frequently condition human-animal relations.[58] While history indicates that this is certainly not always the case (in the contemporary world, for example, many people who love their pets are complicit through their consumption habits with abuse against animals on industrial farms), Dolors' testimony gives us evidence that for some people a personal commitment to other creatures can lead to a commitment to the protection of animal lives in general. Dolors' mutually-enforcing appreciation for human and canine life, and the enormity of their loss, allows her to recognize human beings' responsibility towards other creatures, including our duty not to do them harm. Like the protagonists of *Disgrace* and *Love's a Bitch*, this recognition becomes the basis for alternative ethics towards animals. In Taylor's terms, Dolors' interview is an opportunity for "dwelling with (her) own vulnerability (…) mak(ing) her empathetic to the vulnerability of all bodies".[59]

Oral testimony and the history of animal rights activism

Listening to Dolors' grief over the loss of her dogs and the pain suffered by other animals I was reminded of an interview with the British animal rights activist Ronnie Lee, part of the Animal Welfare Activists collection archived at the the National Sound Archive in the British Library.[60] A founder of the Animal Liberation Front in the 1970s, Lee had dedicated most of his adult life to the political struggle for animal rights, spending several years in prison for his activism. Throughout his interview Lee speaks both of his pain and anger at witnessing cruelty to animals and of the satisfactions and lessons of years of activism. By the time of his meeting with interviewer Barbara Gibson in early 2002, Lee was living a quieter life with his partner and their rescue animals. Asked

towards the end of the eight-hour interview about the best and worst moments of his life, Lee remembers the death of a dog run over by a car while they were out walking:

> Even now it's starting to make me cry, to think of it. It was such a traumatic experience really. Probably more than anything that's the worst thing that's happened. Because although it's terrible about animal abuse and everything that goes on, when it's your own, it's much more personal when it's your own creature.[61]

Similarly to the interview with Dolors, Lee's memories move back and forth between examples of abuse against different groups of animals and accounts of his relationships with individual animals and people. Because it incorporates a variety of interactions across species, Lee's interview serves as a valuable counter-example to some of the portrayals of human-animal relations put forth in animal rights theory, including Peter Singer's famous book *Animal Liberation.* Published in 1975, *Animal Liberation* became, according to popular sources at the time, "the bible of the animal liberation movement".[62] The book was massively influential on Lee's generation of activists. At points in his interview Lee expresses views about animal rights similar to those put forth in *Animal Liberation*, stressing in particular the suffering of animals as the basis for people's responsibility towards them. But Lee's love for his dog and other pets is markedly at odds with Singer's philosophy, which explicitly derides human affection towards animals. Indeed, Singer opens *Animal Liberation* by deliberately distancing himself from pet-keepers and self-proclaimed animal lovers. He and his wife, he says, are "interested in the prevention of suffering and misery" but "(o)therwise (…) not especially 'interested' in animals".[63]

If Singer believes that loving domestic animals is incompatible with a proper defence of their interests, Lee's and Dolors' interviews suggest otherwise. Their emotional bonds with animals is closer to Taylor's argument for an ethics of non-violence towards animals based on an experience of physical vulnerability across different species than to Singer's claim that human beings have a moral

responsibility towards other animals because those animals can suffer. Singer's theory is clearly expressed in the opening sentence of *Animal Liberation*, which states that the "book is about the tyranny of humans over nonhuman animals."[64] By stressing human responsibility both for the perpetuation and prevention of animal suffering Singer emphasizes people's agency and downplays that of other animals, thereby putting humans and animals in a hierarchical relationship. This is in clear contrast to Taylor's work, in which vulnerability is shared by human and animal bodies, albeit, following Butler, unequally; a human ethics of non-violence towards animals requires that people recognize not only our potential power over other animals but also our shared vulnerability with all "animalkind".[65]

Lee's and Dolors' interviews remind us that people's engagement with political theory can be complex and even contradictory. They also point to a need for more capacious understandings of theory itself. This is one of the lessons I take from Haraway's writing on cross-species encounters: in order to be open to the experience of the nonhuman other and to the lessons of our meetings with them, we might need to recognize the limits of our bookish learning.[66] I interpret this not as a form of anti-intellectual populism (one could hardly accuse Haraway of that) but a validation of the different kinds of knowledge offered by research methods that rely on interaction with and observation of live subjects.

In a similar vein, in her ethnographic study of contemporary English people's relationship to their pets Rebekah Fox argues that interviews and field research add important nuance to animal studies precisely by exploring how theoretical claims about human-animal relations play out in people's reflections on their day-to-day lives. In particular Fox notes that ethnography can provide a useful contrast to rational understandings of the subject as found in some philosophies of human-animal relations:

> The intimate embodied nature of the human-pet relationship challenges such ways of defining subjectivity, through other types of relationality and connection, which are not purely based upon notions of language or intelligence. This (is a) "lived intersubjectivity" of two beings sharing a messy, awkward, loving relationship...[67]

Similarly, oral history, with its particular interest in the affective dimensions of life as expressed in memory, may help to bring out the "messy, awkward" nature of human-animal relations, adding complexity both to theoretical debates and fleshing out our understanding of the history of the animal rights movement.

Conclusion

Examining the themes of mourning and witnessing in an interview with an ageing woman who has dedicated much of her adult life to defending other animals, this article has demonstrated that oral history can bring valuable life-story evidence to contemporary academic research on human-animal relations and to the history of the contemporary animal rights movement. Following the tradition of oral history that vindicates witnessing and mourning as responses to violence committed against people, and inspired in particular by the work of Judith Butler, I have argued that these can be political tools as well as emotional processes. Acknowledging the potentially political dimension of mourning animals is particularly important in relation to pets. As Alice Kuzniar demonstrates, the relationship between people and their companion animals is often represented in contemporary Western societies as an infantile attachment, emotionally inferior to the properly mature love between people. The pathologizing of the human-pet bond is evident in some writings on animal rights, most notoriously Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation*, which reserves special contempt for middle-aged female pet owners.

In the light of such stubborn and sexist stereotyping, it would be all too easy to dismiss the interview with Dolors Benet as a quaint story of a "woman who loves animals". Contra Singer, the evidence presented here demonstrates that love for companion animals and a commitment to end the suffering of all creatures are not mutually exclusive. This article also refuses the zero sum logic that pits the defence of animal rights against a commitment to the lives and welfare of human beings,[68] showing that that there are cases where these are mutually reinforcing. By drawing attention to the "entangled"[69] memories of human and canine vulnerability in Dolors' interview, I have therefore endeavored to encourage oral historians to be alert to stories about animals in our interviewers' narratives and in so doing enlarge our understanding of our subjects' histories, contexualizing them in a wider world that encompasses relations across species as well as among people.

[1] For an overview of some this work, see Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 2nd edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 175-94.

[2] Dolors Benet is a pseudonym.

[3] The long list of "Model Questions" in Paul Thompson's classic work on oral history, for example, includes two references to animals - livestock and pets. Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 2nd edition (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 297, 300. Thompson makes clear that this list is indicative only, but is noteworthy that animals are categorized under the categories "meals" and "leisure", and that interviewers are not directed to ask more detailed questions about the kinds of relationships the narrator may have had with the animals in their life. I use this example not to single out Thompson as exceptional in this regard, but because of the unparalleled influence of his book among English-language practitioners of oral history.

[4] For example, Charles T. Morrisey, "Oral History Interviews: From Inception to Closure," in *Handbook of Oral History*, eds Thomas L. Charlton, Lois E. Myers and Rebecca Sharpless (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2006), 184; Donald Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, 3rd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 80; Valerie Raleigh Yow, "Interviewing Techniques and Strategies," in *The Oral History Reader*, 3rd edition., eds Bob Perks and Alistair Thomson (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 154.

[5] Jack Goody*, Myth, Ritual and the Oral* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[6] Alessandro Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 13.

[7] Raphael Samuel, "'Quarry Roughs': Life and Labour in Headington Quarry, 1860-1920. An Essay in Oral History," in *Village Life and Labour*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 139-243.

[8] Jason Hribal, "'Animals are Part of the Working Class': A Challenge to Labour History," *Labor History* 44, no. 4, (2003): 435-453.

[9] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 4; Thompson, *Voice of the Past,* 87-88.

[10] Ronald Blythe, *Akenfield* (London: Penguin, 1999 [1969]), 54.

[11] Ibid., 231-33.

[12] Ibid., 264.

[13] Ibid., 231-33.

[14] Ibid., 264.

[15] ADDA's activities and philosophy may better qualify it as an animal welfare organization, but I use the term "animal rights" throughout the article to reflect the organization's name.

[16] Colin Jerolmack, "How Pigeons Became Rats: The Cultural-Spatial Logic of Problem Animals," *Social Problems* 55, no. 1 (2008): 73-74.

[17] Ibid., 73-74.

[18] Ibid., 79.

[19] "Las plagas de las ciudades tienen alas: palomas, gaviotas y estorninos," *elconfidencial.com*, August 16, 2009 (accessed 1 July, 2017).

[20] "Barcelona captura 90.000 palomas en tres años y reduce la plaga a la mitad," *La Vanguardia*, May 19, 2013; "BCN contrata el sacrificio de 64.700 palomas en 16 meses," *El Periódico*, August 12, 2010.

[21] Dolors Benet, interview by the author, July 9, 2015, Barcelona. Interview conducted in Spanish; all translations by the author.

[22] Carla Martínez, interview by the author, June 30, 2015, Barcelona. Carla Martínez is a pseudonym. Interview conducted in Spanish; translation by the author.

[23] John Howard, *Men like That: A Southern Queer History (*Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 5.

[24] Erica Fudge, "A Left-Handed Blow: Writing the History of Animals," in *Representing Animals,* ed. Nigel Rothfels (Bloomington and Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 2002), 6.

[25] Chris Pearson, "Dogs, History, and Agency," *History & Theory*, *Theme Issue* 52 (2013): 130. See also Jason Hribal, "Animals, Agency and Class: Writing the History of Animals from Below," *Human Ecology Review* 14 (2007): 101-12.

[26] Erica Fudge, "Milking Other Men's Beasts," *History and Theory* 52 (2013): 13.

[27] Ibid., 15.

[28] Pearson, "Dogs, History, and Agency," 136.

[29] Colin Jerolmack, *The Global Pigeon* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 25. See also Ahmed Belguermi et al., "Pigeons Discriminate Between Human Feeders," *Animal Cognition* 14, no. 6 (2011): 909-14.

[30] Pigeons and other birds do of course leave other kinds of traces, including feces and footprints. If recorded, their sounds are also a record of their existence.

[31] For the argument that cotton and other textiles have historical agency, see Richard C. Foltz, "Does Nature Have Historical Agency? World History, Environmental History, and How Historians Can Help Save the Planet," *The History Teacher* 37, no. 1 (2003): 10.

[32] Ibid., 21-23; Pearson, "Dogs, History, and Agency," 130.

[33] Belguermi et al., "Pigeons Discriminate between Human Feeders," 910.

[34] Erica Fudge, *Animal* (London: Reaktion, 2002), 138-39.

[35] Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008). A number of historians interested in animal agency have been influenced by Haraway. See for example Pearson, "Dogs, History, and Agency" and other articles in the same themed issue of *History & Theory*.

[36] Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Rougledge, 1992), 6-7, cited in Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 216.

[37] Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 206.

[38] Kathryn Gillespie, "Witnessing Animal Others: Bearing Witness, Grief, and the Political Function of Emotion," *Hypatia* 31, no. 3 (2016): 572-73.

[39] Ibid., 572-88.

[40] Ibid., 573.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Benet interview.

[43] Benet interview.

[44] Benet interview.

[45] Benet interview.

[46] Judith Bulter, "Violence, Mourning, Politics," in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 19-49.

[47] Ibid., 29, 30, 42-43.

[48] Ibid., 22.

[49] Chloë Taylor, "The Precarious Lives of Animals: Butler, Coetzee, and Animal Ethics," *Philosophy Today* 52, no. 1 (2008): 61.

[50] Ibid., 67.

[51] Ibid., 61.

[52] Alice A. Kuzniar, *Melancholia's Dog* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 3.

[53] Ibid., 170.

[54] Benet interview.

[55] Kuzniar, *Melancholia's Dog*, 171-172.

[56] Ibid., 172

[57] Ibid., 172.

[58] Ibid., 3.

[59] Taylor, "Precarious Lives of Animals," 71.

[60] Ronnie Lee, interview by Barbara Gibson, March 22, 2002, British Library National Sound Archive, Collection F10971-F10976.

[61] Lee interview, tape F10976, Side B.

[62] Peter Singer, *Animal liberation*, 2nd edition (London and New York: Thorsons, 1991 [1975]), viii.

[63] Ibid., ii-iii.

[64] Ibid, i.

[65] Taylor, “Precarious Lives of Animals,” 66.

[66] See in particular Haraway’s critique of philosopher Jacques Derrida for being insufficiently curious about his cat. *When Species Meet,* 22-23.

[67] Rebekah Fox, "Animal Behaviours, Posthuman Lives: Everyday Negotiations of the Animal-Human Divide in Pet-Keeping," *Social & Cultural Geography* 7, no. 4 (2006): 535.

[68] Taylor, “Precarious Lives of Animals,” 65-66. See also Dominick LaCapra, *History and Its Limits: Human, Animal, Violence* (Ithaca NY, Cornell University Press, 2011), 186, note 50.

[69] Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 80 and 309 note 20.